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->From the Editor’s Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Happy Friday the 13th, to you who are superstitious and/or believe in any significance of the day. Personally, I think it makes for an interesting topic for discussion every once in awhile. But, not tonight.

The holiday season is in full swing. We skipped Black Friday, and did not do anything during Cyber Monday, or any of the other "big sale" days on the newly-converted calendar. It’s like these days are minor holidays or something! People, relax, these are sales gimmicks to get you into the stores early, and often!! I don’t mind shopping, too much, as long as I know what I want to buy, and where. If I need to browse, looking for gift ideas, I get impatient and testy very quickly - especially if I’m in a shopping mall. This year, we’ve hit the mall once, and that’s likely the only time we’ll go there. Actually, we’re pretty much done with our holiday shopping - early, for a change!

So, while you’re out thinking of what to buy this year, or where you’re planning to spend the holidays, relax and enjoy another week’s issue!

Until next time...

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - Lindsay Lohan To Sue Rockstar Over GTA V Like ness!
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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Lindsay Lohan To Sue Rockstar Over GTA V Likeness

Lindsay Lohan is an actress best known for her work in The Parent Trap, Freaky Friday, and Mean Girls. More recently she has been in the eyes of the media for more scandalous endeavors. These range from DUI charges to failing probation mandated drug tests. All has been quiet though in the recent days, well, until this. Lohan is suing Rockstar, the developer and publisher of Grand Theft Auto V, for supposedly using her likeness in the game.

Lohan’s lawyers are apparently forming a case to demand money for the usage of her face. The clear evidence of this heinous crime includes: The blonde on the cover, a blonde in a hotel, and even a blonde hiding from paparazzi! This all comes after Daz Dillinger claimed that Rockstar stole his music for the same game.

So how will Rockstar respond to ’Grand Theft Lohan’? Only time will tell.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Tech Giants Unite Against NSA

The giants of the tech industry are uniting to wage a campaign for sweeping reforms to the National Security Agency.

Google, Facebook, Twitter, Yahoo, Microsoft, Apple, LinkedIn and AOL are setting aside their business rivalries to demand that Congress and President Obama scale back the government s voracious surveillance.

[T]his summer s revelations highlighted the urgent need to reform government surveillance practices worldwide, the companies wrote in an open letter to Obama and members of Congress, appearing in a national print ad Monday.

The balance in many countries has tipped too far in favor of the state and away from the rights of the individual rights that are enshrined in our Constitution. It s time for change.

The companies are demanding reforms above and beyond legislation in front of Congress that would curb the NSA s powers.

The companies outlined a set of principles that should guide surveillance reforms, including limits on the government s access to data, increased oversight of surveillance programs and increased transparency from both the government agencies requesting data and receiving the requests.

Additionally, the companies said U.S. surveillance programs shouldn’t keep American tech companies from operating internationally, including in

countries that oppose U.S. access to their citizens data.

 Recent revelations about government surveillance activities have shaken the trust of our users, and it is time for the United States government to act to restore the confidence of citizens around the world, Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer said in a statement.

The campaign comes after months of leaks that have revealed, in ever-greater detail, efforts by the U.S. government to spy on Internet users and track their contacts.

Documents released by Edward Snowden show the government collects information about Americans phone calls and Internet communications, including by tapping into tech companies data streams.

Tech companies fear the revelations could put their entire business models at risk.

If users begin to get skittish about sharing information online, it could stop the booming business of Internet advertising dead in its tracks.

Speaking in D.C. earlier this year, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said companies like Google and Facebook suffered a loss in user trust after the Snowden revelations.

 The trust metrics for all [tech companies] went down when Prism came out, he said, referring to a surveillance program targeting users of nine major Internet companies.

The companies alluded to the threat in their call to arms on Monday.

 People won t use technology they don t trust, Microsoft general counsel Brad Smith said in a statement.

 Governments have put this trust at risk, and governments need to help restore it.

The aggressive new campaign is a shift from the summer, when Silicon Valley giants downplayed the significance of the Snowden leaks.

"There’s been spying for years, there’s been surveillance for years, and so forth, I’m not going to pass judgment on that, it’s the nature of our society," Google Chairman Eric Schmidt said at an event in New York in September.

But the companies began to change their tone as more details of the NSA s surveillance emerged. The most explosive revelation, from their perspective, came in October with a report that the NSA has secretly mined Google and Yahoo s data as it traveled between overseas servers.

Schmidt called the activity "really outrageous."

"The steps that the organization was willing to do without good judgment to pursue its mission and potentially violate people’s privacy, it’s not OK," Schmidt told The Wall Street Journal in November.

Since the revelations began in June, the companies have fought for the ability to tell their users what information the government has accessed.

Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Yahoo and LinkedIn have all asked the court

that authorizes foreign intelligence surveillance for the ability to publish information about the scope of requests for user data they receive.

The news reports of government surveillance made users think that companies hand over data much more frequently and readily than they do, the companies have argued.

The companies have also backed surveillance reforms being considered by Congress.

In October, Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Yahoo, Apple, AOL and LinkedIn announced their support for the USA Freedom Act.

The bill, introduced by Patriot Act author and NSA critic Rep. James Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.), would allow companies to be more transparent about requests for user data they receive, require the government to be more transparent about its collection of data and would end programs that collect data on Americans in bulk.

The tech coalition applauded the bill for its transparency and surveillance-limiting provisions. Now companies are throwing a few more proposals in to the mix.

In addition to limits on bulk collection and increased transparency and oversight measures, the companies outlined steps that would keep them competitive internationally.

Some countries are considering laws that would force Internet companies to locate their servers in a country if it processes data belonging to citizens of that country.

Additionally, the European Union is considering legislation that could prevent Europeans from using U.S. Internet companies if those companies comply with the U.S. government s surveillance requests.

The tech companies said Monday that governments shouldn t prevent their citizens from using foreign Internet services. Governments should also work together to resolve the conflict when countries have conflicting laws regarding access to user data, the tech giants said.

We urge the U.S. to take the lead and make reforms that ensure that government surveillance efforts are clearly restricted by law, proportionate to the risks, transparent and subject to independent oversight, they wrote.

Microsoft Takes On NSA With Three New Privacy Features

Microsoft has instituted a new set of security protocols for "protecting customer data from government snooping." The news comes after allegations that Microsoft assisted the NSA by providing private data.

"Many of our customers have serious concerns about government surveillance of the Internet," writes general council and executive vice president Brad Smith. "We share their concerns. That s why we are taking steps to ensure governments use legal process rather than technological brute force to access customer data."

In order to enhance customer security, Microsoft is instituting three features. The company will be enhancing encryption across all services, reinforcing legal protection for customers, and improving transparency to show that Microsoft products do not have back door access.

Among the included products are Outlook.com, Office 365, SkyDrive, and Windows Azure. Xbox Live and Xbox One are not mentioned explicitly, nor is Skype (which is present on the Xbox One).

The new privacy and security features will be in place by the end of 2014. Microsoft is also working with other companies to enhance the security between services, as email often passes among a number of different providers.

German Prosecutor: Still Weighing NSA Probe

Germany’s chief federal prosecutor says he hasn’t decided whether to open an investigation into alleged surveillance by the U.S. National Security Agency but is suggesting that he’s skeptical.

Prosecutor Harald Range’s office has been considering since June whether it has grounds to investigate reports of NSA surveillance in Germany, which later included allegations that Chancellor Angela Merkel’s cellphone was monitored.

Range said Wednesday he hasn’t made a final decision because he’s still awaiting answers to some questions from German authorities. But he says there so far are "no concrete indications that the NSA or (Britain’s) GCHQ systematically monitored German telephone and Internet traffic."

The prosecutor says he’s also still seeking answers regarding the "conclusiveness and origin" of an alleged NSA document that appeared to show Merkel’s phone was targeted.

Verizon Takes Hard Line on Surveillance Vote

Verizon Communications Inc told activists it may skip a vote on a shareholder proposal that seeks details on the company’s cooperation with government surveillance efforts.

Verizon’s law firm Jones Day said in a November 25 letter that the company would exclude the measure from its 2014 proxy statement unless the activists did more to verify their eligibility to file the proposal.

The company’s response appears to be more aggressive than the stance AT&T Inc took against a similar proposal, said Jonas Kron, senior vice president for Trillium Asset Management, a co-filer of the measures at both telecommunications giants.

Kron said Trillium has provided more detail, but that Verizon’s action suggests it will sidestep the usual process in which companies ask the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission for permission to skip votes on shareholder proposals.

"If they are going to challenge the shareholder proposal, I hope they will work within the SEC process," Kron said.

Verizon spokesman Bob Varettoni said via email the company’s response as routine.

"At this point, we have not taken any formal position on the proposal," he wrote. "The SEC requires shareholders to demonstrate their eligibility to submit a proposal. We’ve simply sought the information that we believe is necessary to determine the proponent’s eligibility."

A spokesman for the SEC did not return messages.

The dispute at Verizon is just one of many playing out this month ahead of the springtime, shareholder-meeting season. Generally, corporate shareholders who own $2,000 worth of stock for a year may file proposals for a vote by all investors.

But the rise of proposals with a social agenda or those put forth by labor groups has prompted many companies to push back, often by seeking SEC permission to skip the measures. The agency grants such permission about half the time.

To back up their requests, companies typically argue that shareholders are putting forth ideas that should be treated as "ordinary business" rather than subject to a shareholder vote, or that if passed their proposals could hamper other company operations. AT&T made both of those arguments earlier this month. and Verizon could seek SEC permission.

Both AT&T and Verizon shareholders, including Trillium and New York State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli, who oversees the state’s pension fund, had filed measures calling for details of their cooperation with U.S. and foreign spy agencies.

In the wake of revelations by former U.S. National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, the shareholders cited media reports of intelligence agencies’ involvement with the companies and criticism from foreign leaders.

The activists asked both companies to schedule votes on a measure calling for the publication of semi-annual reports with details such as how often customer information was shared with government agencies.

In the November 25 letter Verizon’s attorney at Jones Day told Trillum’s Kron that the company intended to exclude the surveillance proposal from its proxy filing unless it corrected what it called "procedural deficiencies."

Among other things the firm wrote that material Trillium submitted had not demonstrated an investor was a shareholder entitled to vote the shares. Trillium responded to Verizon on December 9 with additional material but said the firm did not concede the extra proof was necessary.

Yahoo Blames Ongoing Email Disruption on Tricky Hardware Problem

Yahoo Inc’s email service has been unavailable to some users since Monday night due to a "hardware problem" that the Internet company said has been harder to fix than it expected.

Yahoo believes the problem will be fixed by 3 p.m. PST Wednesday, according to a post on Yahoo’s official Tumblr blog by the company’s senior vice president of communications, Jeffrey Bonforte.

Bonforte did not specify how many users were affected by the email outage, which he said began at 10:27 p.m. PST on Monday. He said the company has "dozens of people working around the clock" to resolve the problem.

"The issue has been harder to fix than we originally expected," Bonforte said.

Yahoo Mail is the most popular Web-based email product among desktop computer users in the United States, according to analytics firm comScore. Yahoo Mail ranks second worldwide, behind Google Inc’s Gmail and ahead of Microsoft Corp’s Outlook.com.

A redesigned version of Yahoo Mail, which the company introduced in October, has met with a mixed reaction by users. Many users have griped that the new version eliminated popular features such as "tabs."

NYC Launches Nation s Largest Free Public WiFi Network

Internet service is painfully slow and hard to come by in NYC, but at least it’s about to be free for residents of 95 Manhattan blocks!

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg announced that a new outdoor public WiFi network is blanketing part of Harlem, from 110th to 138th streets between Frederick Douglass Boulevard and Madison Avenue. The area encompasses 50 parks, and Harlem Children’s Zone will be increasing awareness of the network among residents, business and visitors.

It’s the largest continuous free outdoor public wireless network in the nation, according to a release from City Hall. It’s being rolled out in three phases, to be completed in May, in coordination with the city’s Technology Development Corporation and the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications. It’ll increase digital access for 80,000 Harlem residents, which includes 13,000 residents of public housing.

Mr. Bloomberg’s canned quote in the release points out that this will increase access to "information about Harlem’s rich history and attractions," so be sure to google Harlem next time you’re in that neck of the woods.

Twitter Backtracks on Block Feature after Users Revolt

Twitter Inc was forced to nix a change to its "block" feature on Thursday after attracting a wave of protest from users who said the new policy empowered perpetrators of online abuse.

The humbling reversal on one of the most sensitive policy issues facing the social network came as Twitter encountered user revolt for the first time as a public company.

Under the short-lived change on Thursday, a blocked Twitter user could view or tweet at the person who blocked him or her, but that activity would have been rendered invisible to the victim as if the offending account did not exist.

Under the re-instated policy, users could prevent their harassers from following them or interacting with their tweets. Users are also explicitly notified if they are blocked.

Before it backtracked, Twitter had said Thursday that the change was meant to protect victims of harassment who wanted to filter out abusive messages but feared that the act of blocking a user would prompt retaliation.

"We have decided to revert the change after receiving feedback from many users - we never want to introduce features at the cost of users feeling less safe," vice president of product Michael Sippey wrote in a blog post.

Chief Executive Dick Costolo initially sought to address the mounting criticism by saying on Twitter that the new features were widely requested by victims of abuse.

But many were not convinced. Within hours, the service was flooded with angry users, including many who did not understand the nuances of the new policy, and hundreds had signed an online petition to reverse the change.

"New @twitter block policy is like a home security system that instead of keeping people out puts a blindfold on YOU when they come in," said user @edcasey.

"'Just ignore them & they'll stop' is a dangerous thing to say to bullied kids & a dangerous thing to say to stalked/harassed Twitter users," wrote @red3blog, another user.

Keeping abuse in check is a key issue for the company, which needs to keep hold of existing users and attract hundreds of millions of new ones to justify the stratospheric valuation that investors have placed on its stock.

Twitter shares have risen 35 percent to $55.33 the past two weeks on investor expectations that the company can sustain its growth for years and mature into an internet powerhouse.

The changes were announced Thursday after the market close.

The company's swift about-face similarly drew an outpouring of relief.

"The people have spoken and Twitter listened, thanks," said user @samar_ismail.

The controversy highlighted Twitter's dilemma over how it should police the freewheeling service or stamp out abuse.

Twitter, which once espoused a radically hands-off approach to moderating content, was pressed in August to strengthen its "report abuse" functions after two high-profile women in the United Kingdom, feminist and

journalist Caroline Criado-Perez and Labour Party politician Stella Creasy, were subjected to a deluge of death and rape threats.

Twitter’s top executive in the U.K., Tony Wang, and Del Harvey, the head of its trust and safety team, issued personal apologies to the women after revising Twitter’s rules.

Twitter said Thursday that the company’s policies were still evolving and that the block feature remained problematic because some users were fearful that their harassers would be notified when they become blocked.

"Moving forward, we will continue to explore features designed to protect users from abuse and prevent retaliation," Sippey, the Twitter executive, wrote.

"We’ve built Twitter to help you create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers. That vision must coexist with keeping users safe on the platform."

The backlash was a rare event for a company that for the most part has been hailed for championing its users, who now number more than 250 million worldwide.

Although Twitter has made unpopular design tweaks, it has maintained a better policy record than social media rival Facebook Inc, which has repeatedly upset users with abrupt changes to its privacy policies.

Microsoft Codename ’Threshold’: The Next Major Windows Wave Takes Shape

When I blogged recently about Microsoft’s plans on the operating-systems front following Windows 8.1, I mentioned a couple of "spring 2015" releases.
threshold

It turns out the Microsoft codename for that wave of deliverables is "Threshold."

A couple of my contacts have confirmed that Microsoft Executive Vice President Terry Myerson recently mentioned the Threshold codename in an internal email about plans for his unified operating-system engineering group.

If all goes according to early plans, Threshold will include updates to all three OS platforms (Xbox One, Windows and Windows Phone) that will advance them in a way to share even more common elements.

(The codename Threshold, for those wondering, derives from the planet around which the first halo ring orbited in the original Halo game launched back in 2001. Threshold joins "Cortana," Microsoft’s answer to Siri, as yet another codename with its origins in the Xbox franchise.)

From what I’ve heard, Threshold doesn’t refer to a single Windows OS - not even the expected, converged hybrid comprised of the Windows Phone OS and Windows RT. Instead, the codename refers to the wave of operating systems across Windows-based phones, devices and gaming consoles.

The Xbox One OS, Windows 8.x OS and Windows Phone 8 OS already share a

common Windows NT core. As we've heard before, Microsoft is working to deliver a single app store across its myriad Windows platforms. Company officials also are laboring to make the developer toolset for all three of these platforms more similar.

But Threshold will add another level of commonality across Microsoft's various Windows-based platforms, sources said. With the Threshold wave, Microsoft plans to support the same core set of "high value activities" across platforms. These high-value activities include expression/documents (Office, and the coming "Remix" digital storytelling app, I'd think); decision making/task completion (Bing, I'd assume); IT management (Intune and Workplace Join, perhaps?) and "serious fun."

CEO Steve Ballmer mentioned this concept of high-value activities at back in July when he announced Microsoft's cross-company reorg to make the company more focused around its new "One Microsoft" mission.

Before Microsoft gets to Threshold, the company is on track to deliver an update to Windows 8.1 (known as Windows 8.1 Update 1) around the same time that it delivers Windows Phone "Blue" (Windows Phone 8.1). That's supposedly happening in the spring 2014/Q2 2014 timeframe, from what my sources have said.

I've asked Microsoft officials if they'd confirm any of this information about Threshold. No word back so far.

Update: A Microsoft spokesperson said the company had no comment on "rumors and speculation."

Free AVG AntiVirus Comes to Apple Macs

By now, the notion that Macs are free of malware is recognized as an outdated false sense of security. As Apple's computers get more popular with consumers, so they do with miscreants. There are a few anti-virus/anti-malware options for Macs, such as the free Sophos Antivirus for Mac, and today Apple users got another option.

AVG Technologies announced that its AVG AntiVirus software, long a popular free download for Windows PCs, finally made the jump to Mac computers today (Dec. 12). The new software, simply called AVG AntiVirus for Mac, is compatible with both the latest Mavericks (OS X 10.9) operating system and its predecessor Mountain Lion (OS X 10.8). Mavericks is a free upgrade for OS X Leopard (10.6.8), Lion (10.7) or Mountain Lion. AVG has stated that it has 172 million active users of its PC AntiVirus software.

Among AVG AntiVirus for Mac's main features such as auto updates real time scanning is a potentially handy one that lets users scan individual files or folders by simply dragging and dropping them onto an icon.

The prospects for AVG's Mac product are good, if its PC performance is any guide. In July 2013 tests of the PC version, independent lab AV-Test found that it caught 98.9 percent of 1,972 malware samples that had emerged in the preceding four weeks. All anti-virus software tends to do well on such tests, however. The average detection rate for all programs AV-Test evaluated was 95.2, and AV-Test ranked AVG's malware detection at 5 points out of a possible 6. AV-Test also reported that the PC app had no significant impact on system performance and battery life, earning 6

out of 6. Of course, it remains to be seen how well AVG AntiVirus for Mac will do.

This isn t AVG’s first Mac app. In November, it launched Cleaner, a hard drive cleanup program. The company also offers PrivacyFix, a browser plugin which is also compatible with Macs, that lets you adjust privacy settings on sites you visit, such as Facebook and Google, and also see which sites are tracking you, with the option of disabling them.

Instagram Unveils Private Photo-sharing, Messaging

Photo-sharing service Instagram unveiled a new feature Thursday that allows users to send images and messages privately, as the Facebook-owned company sought to bolster its appeal among younger consumers who are increasingly using mobile messaging applications.

The new Instagram Direct feature allows users to send a photo or video to a single person or up to 15 people, and to have real-time text conversations.

"Sometimes you want to be able to share, not with everyone, but just with a specific group," said Kevin Systrom, Instagram co-founder and chief executive during a presentation in New York. "Instagram Direct is a simple way to send photos and videos to your friends."

Instagram claims to have more than 150 million monthly users who have shared 16 billion photos on the service. Until now, the photos could only be shared publicly, allowing them to be seen by anyone using the service.

Facebook Inc, the world’s No. 1 Internet social network, bought Instagram for $1 billion in 2012.

The new features come as Facebook and Instagram face increasing competition from a new crop of mobile messaging services, including WhatsApp and Snapchat.

In October, Facebook said it was seeing a decline in daily use by younger teenagers in the United States, although it said overall use by teenagers was stable.

"Bottom line, this is a catch-up move for Instagram," wrote Forrester Research analyst Julie Ask in a blog post. "Apps like WeChat already allow users to share videos, photos, messages, cartoons, voice clips to individuals, groups, groups created around an event."

Instagram made the announcement Thursday in a swanky two-story event studio in midtown Manhattan, which some industry observers speculated was picked to lure the attention of ad firms on Madison Avenue. Systrom didn’t address advertising or any revenue-linked potential of the new features.

Microsoft Joins Major Push To Kill Passwords Once and For All

As passwords have become more annoying and less secure over the years,

several of tech s brightest minds have looked at one another and said, Surely there must be a better way? And although Google has typically been the most visible face in the crusade to kill the password, it looks like Microsoft will put more of its own resources into the effort as well. IDG News, via Network World, reports that Microsoft has joined the board of directors of the FIDO Alliance, an industry consortium founded in 2012 to reduce Internet services reliance on passwords. The alliance, which includes heavyweights such as Google, Lenovo and LG, is working on standardizing authentication technologies will lead to better interoperability and innovations in biometrics, PINs (personal identification numbers) and secondary authentication technologies, IDG News says.

Woman Unknowingly Tweeted About Death of Husband

A Washington state woman who regularly monitors police scanner traffic unknowingly live-tweeted about her husband’s death in a freeway crash.

In a series of gut-wrenching tweets on Wednesday that grew more frantic, the Vancouver, Wash., mother first tweeted how horrible it was when she learned someone had died on Interstate 205 near the Oregon border.

Caran Johnson, who uses the handle @ScanCouver, then told her Twitter followers that she was trying not to panic because her husband, who drives the freeway, wasn’t picking up his phone and was late getting home.

"i’m a basketcase," she tweeted.

Johnson also worried because her husband had epilepsy and was feeling faint when he left work early. She wondered whether he might have pulled over somewhere and fretted about how long she should wait for him before calling police.

As the events unfolded, she messaged Washington State Patrol spokesman Will Finn directly, asking whether he had descriptions of the vehicles involved in the collision. Finn said he didn’t, but it struck him as odd so he began looking into the crash.

"I contacted the investigator and we put two and two together. I realized I had a situation on my hands," Finn said Thursday while confirming that Johnson uses the Twitter handle @ScanCouver that appeared on the tweets.

Troopers later went to Johnson’s home to tell her that her husband, 47-year-old Craig Johnson, had died in the collision.

Caran Johnson then tweeted: "it’s him. he died."

"It hits very close to home," said Abbi Russell, a Washington Transportation Department spokeswoman who is familiar with tweets from @ScanCouver. "Yes, it is social media, but it is a community of its own."

Finn said Craig Johnson’s car crossed the median about 2 p.m. Wednesday and collided with another car on I-205 about 5 miles north of Portland, Ore. The other driver, Carol S. Shelley, 54, of Tacoma, suffered serious injuries and was taken to a hospital with broken bones and internal

injuries, authorities said.

Finn said he held off posting a crash photo on Twitter after Caran Johnson messaged him asking about the accident, just in case her husband had been involved. He said he has never met Caran Johnson but the two follow each other on Twitter.

"It’s a terrible situation. We don’t want to tell anybody over social media that they have lost a family member. We would never do that," Finn said.

Caran Johnson received an outpouring of messages on Twitter after the crash.

"Thank you all so much for the prayers and thoughts," she tweeted.

A phone listing could not be found for Caran Johnson. Messages sent to her Facebook and Twitter accounts were not immediately answered.

Finn said investigators did not suspect drugs or alcohol played a role in the crash. Asked whether Craig Johnson’s epilepsy contributed, Finn said the accident was still under investigation.

Brad Benfield, a state licensing spokesman, said the state can restrict or deny driver’s licenses for people with serious medical conditions, based on evaluations by doctors.

Washington doesn’t have a blanket rule against driving with epilepsy or other specific conditions, he said.

Finn said Craig Johnson did not have a medical restriction on his license.

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